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ABSTRACT

Over 200 questionnaire responses from parents of autistic children describing recreational activities that appealed to their children are reported. Recreation is defined as a means of skill development, an outlet for emotions, and an inspiration for living. Parents are encouraged to stimulate recreational interests by taking children along on shopping and other trips, by engaging a child in parallel play to discover the reason for the activity's attraction, and also to introduce the child to social recreation, and by using community resources. Common sense in choosing activities and in reacting to children's play choices is urged. Children's preferences are listed in the area of toys, collections, music, travel, arts and crafts, playground equipment, dramatics, dance, games, sports, outdoor activities, and other special interests, such as mathematics, astronomy, and electricity. Also noted are household chores that children viewed as recreational, and criteria to be used in evaluating the success of recreational activities such as healthful exercise, release of tension, and inculcation of social skills. The questionnaire is included. (GW)

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Recreation for Autistic and Emotionally Disturbed Children

by Mrs. Margaret A. Dewey

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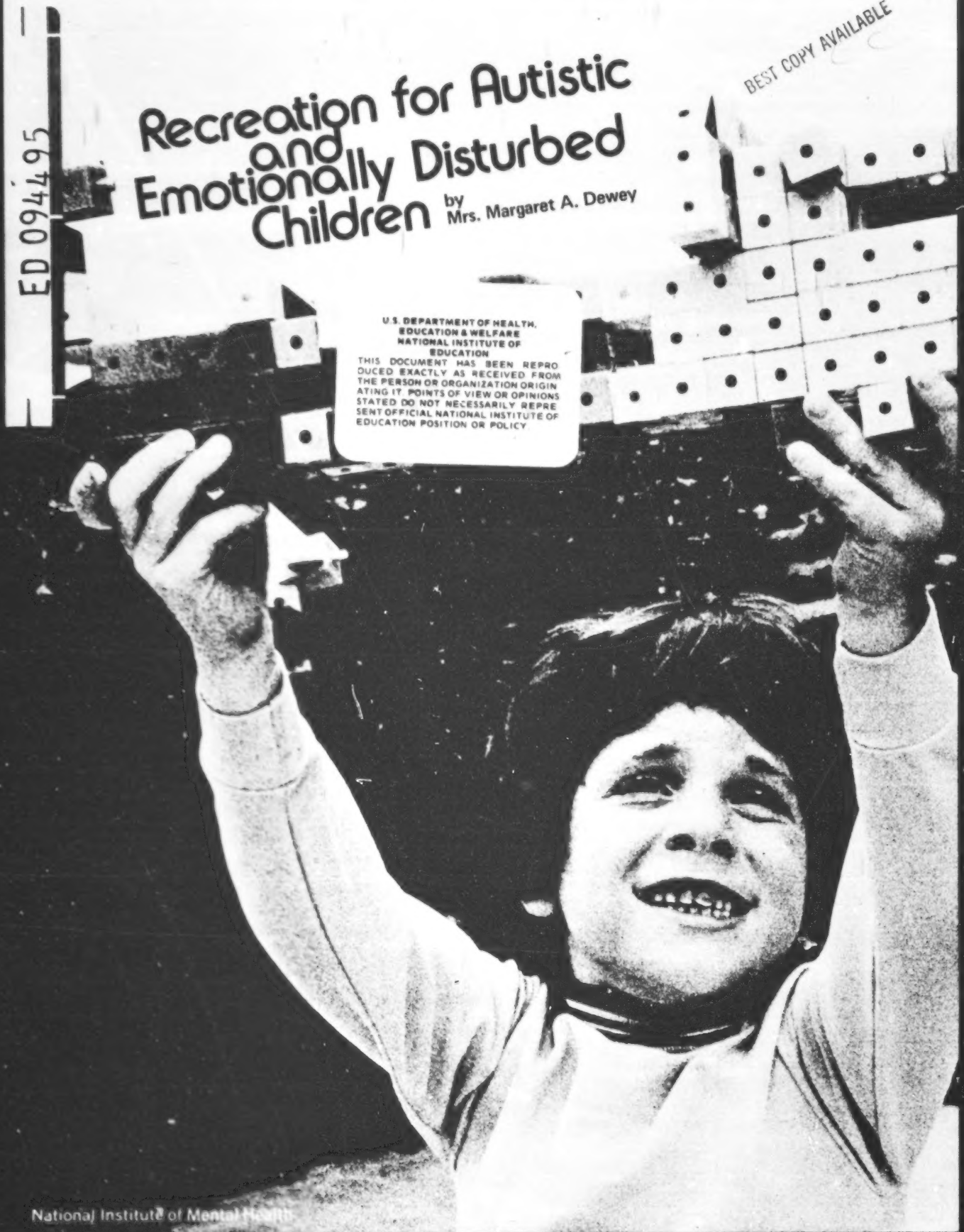

National Institute of Mental Health

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Foreword

This pamphlet is for parents of autistic and emotionally disturbed children and those dedicated professionals who work with these children in schools, community programs, and institutional settings. It provides practical suggestions for recreational activities and offers insights into the needs of these children.

The content of the pamphlet is based on the experiences and observations of parents, teachers, and several young adults with a history of childhood autism. In easy to read fashion, Mrs. Margaret Dewey has assimilated these countless reported experiences.

It is our hope that dissemination of this pamphlet will satisfy a need to share experiences. Further, it is hoped these shared experiences will serve a useful purpose for parents, professionals, and others who may be interested.

Herbert L. Rooney, Chief
Citizen Participation Branch
Office of Program Coordination
National Institute of Mental Health

Preface

This booklet presents some recreational interests of children who have been called autistic at some time in their lives. Its preparation stems from review of existing literature on the subject, volunteer personal contact and correspondence with over a hundred parents during 1970–72, and the preparation of a questionnaire sent to 400 parents and professionals in schools, hospitals, and treatment facilities. The questionnaire, reproduced in the back of this pamphlet, was designed to elicit information from parents and professionals which would describe recreational activities that appeal to these children.

Over 200 completed questionnaires were returned. The response rate exceeded 50 percent. Parents in the National Society for Autistic Children were our most helpful source, in many instances supplementing the completed questionnaire with detailed information about the play habits of individual children. Researcher Marion DeMyer (1967) found parents to be reliable informants on this subject.

In our questionnaire children of all ages from many areas of the country were represented. Several young adults who grew up as autistic children submitted thoughts about the part recreation played in their good adjustment. There was, in addition, ample space for original comments on the questionnaire, and many of the forms came back with long letters attached. I wish I could personally thank each child, parent, and teacher whose detailed report made this booklet possible. It is dedicated to them.

Autistic is a misleading term if it implies a homogeneous group. In fact, the children have been given many other labels. Prominent among other diagnoses is "emotionally disturbed." It is probably true that all autistic children have emotional disturbance to a degree. Some of this is genuine distress at their failures and frustrations; some is inappropriate response which results from errors of judgment; and some expresses the child's private communication with himself. In the literature on programs for the disturbed we find many descriptions of children similar to those called autistic (Mann and Hilsendager 1968; Hobbs 1966; Nichtern 1964). Often, when a child has outgrown his early autistic behavior patterns, his continuing social immaturity is labeled emotional disturbance.

Autistic children not only suffer from multiple diagnoses of their main handicap; they are multiply handicapped as well. This observation has been made by Lorna and John Wing (1971), specialists in autism. Eric Denhoff (1967), from the viewpoint of a specialist in cerebral palsy, suggests using the term *cerebral dysfunction* for organic disabilities which affect a child's motor and mental abilities. He specifically includes autism. Judging from our questionnaire, we do have many children with other evidences of brain damage. Among the children of this study a few are blind or deaf as well as autistic. There are many with perceptual or sensory problems. Some of the children

have disturbances of consciousness or outright epileptic seizures. No child was specifically called cerebral palsied, but many showed neuromuscular incoordination. Some who are clumsy with their fingers are swift and sure of foot, while others are just the reverse. Like palsied children, they showed a wide range of motor disorders from spasticity to tremor, although the disturbances were less prominent than in cerebral palsy.

Most of the autistic children in our sample appeared to be at least mildly retarded, although in some cases they exhibited specialized, highly developed skills. Parents of the younger children frequently reported hyperkinetic behavior disorders. Altogether, the handicaps of the children could be grouped under Eric Denhoff's term, syndromes of cerebral dysfunction, with autism most prominent.

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Some parents report their children love pets; others say there is no response to animals. A small fluffy animal is a good way to start. Courtesy of Margaret Dewey, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

WHY RECREATION?

Recreation has for autistic children the same benefits that it has for other children. It is a natural teacher of skills, an outlet for emotions, and an inspiration for living. The difference with autistic children is that they need these benefits more urgently.

Normal play has rules which most children pick up easily, shifting and adapting their behavior according to the situation. This adaptation is difficult for the autistic child. Some may never learn to communicate by speech. However, the effort to help them acquire some simple forms of recreation and communication should not be abandoned. The more handicapped a child, the more significant *any* improvement is likely to be in helping him adapt to life.

Although recreation and physical education have been used effectively to help children with autistic symptoms in the past, these methods have not been emphasized in recent years (Dewey, in press). The Buttonwood Farms Project at Temple University offers physical training to emotionally disturbed children to improve their living skills (Hilsendager et al. 1968). Nicholas Hobbs (1966) mentions in addition the importance of joy in helping disturbed children in Project Re-ED. We have included a few obsessive rituals as recreation because the children seem to enjoy them, and because they may be used as steps in shaping more acceptable behavior. Dr. Milton Barr (1899) described how one self-destructive child was converted from plucking threads out of his clothing to knitting caps. Looking backwards, Leo Kanner and his colleagues (Kanner et al. 1972) observed that autistic children who made successful social adaptation often did so by converting "obsessive interests" into talents which won them respect from others.

This report is concerned with recreation in the literal sense of the word: that which refreshes the spirit. In severely handicapped children we can only guess they are refreshed by their smiling response and decrease in withdrawn behavior. But these matters are surely relative. What appears a modest improvement to us, such as learning a game, may represent a major improvement in the pleasure of life for an autistic or emotionally disturbed child.

WAYS TO START

Take Them Along

Many children develop recreational interests by accompanying their parents on shopping and other trips ("A drag at first," one mother admitted, "but then we could see he was enjoying it"). Autistic children are generally attentive when they appear to be uninterested, often surprising their parents later when they reveal how much they absorbed. In this way, some have become fond of hiking, camping, and bird-watching. Others have taken up an interest in carpentry and cooking; a few enjoy plays and movies or night ball games.

These children do not always appreciate the same aspects of the activity which attract their parents. Some children give the impression of bird watching when they are actually bird listening. One girl who loves to go to the theatre is happiest during the parts where she can laugh and clap with everyone else. Her mother said she is basically sociable and this is one place where she knows how to be "one of the gang."

A father apologized for the few responses he had made on our questionnaire. He explained that his boy learned so slowly, that it took all the time he could spare to teach him just the few skills he had indicated on the questionnaire. "I hardly have time for my own recreation," he added. This devotion is admirable; on the other hand, it may be difficult for a boy to learn how to have fun from a parent who has given up pleasure. One solution is to give up trying to teach "skills" and to let the child tag along for a few of the parent's favorite occupations.

Play in Parallel

An adult may sit beside a child who is playing in a compulsive manner and begin to play in the same manner. Each may notice the other obliquely, without any confrontation or pressure. There are no questions or demands. The child can pretend he does not notice until he is ready to respond. The objective for the adult is to discover what is fascinating about the activity, then to build on this knowledge and lead the child on to an elaboration of the activity or to something different. Failing to achieve this, parallel play is at least a simple introduction to "sociability." Children who usually lead an isolated existence may begin to interact with another person when the activity involved is something familiar.

Spirals of concentric circles.
Courtesy of Miriam Voelm, Galion, Ohio.

One mother, looking through a soft drink bottle like the one her son had been holding to his eyes off and on for years, discovered a delightfully distorted horizon. She made excited comments about this, and it was a simple matter to offer him different transparent shapes, and then lenses. Possibly this boy will someday have the same hobby as one of the older autistic children, who wrote on the questionnaire that he liked to study light diffusions and diffractions.

An autistic child seldom proceeds in ways adults think are proper. He may one day read haltingly from a primer, the next day sound out words from *Scientific American*. This does not mean he can suddenly read at that level, but that he has found powerful motivation for reading the magazine. Such motivation should be encouraged and allowed to grow. One father decided to go along with his little boy's obsessive interest in light switches. He bought several kinds and built an ingenious toy (see Figure 1). With additional skillful guidance, this boy eventually found employment in electronics.

Parallel play may not always develop budding careers, but it shows a child that other people are interested in the games he plays with himself and introduces him to the excitement of shared fun, a major ingredient of sociability. The understanding a parent or teacher achieves by imitating the child may aid in helping the child out of a rut or expanding it into something useful. The many ruts revealed by our questionnaire would be a study in themselves. Throughout this booklet there will be discussions of compulsive activities which are pursued with evident enjoyment. We call them recreation for this reason. An imaginative adult can abstract the enjoyed elements of an activity, then encourage a child to diversify and expand his interests along progressively advanced lines.

Tearing paper is just one such activity. Like other activities, it may seem pointless in itself. Yet interviews with parents of tearers revealed many different paper-tearing episodes which can be called games. One girl often made a heap of paper scraps which she would then fan across the table. This activity has social possibilities. It could lead to friendly competition between children, using paper plates in a race to fan their scraps all the way across a table. Some autistic children set themselves goals of skill, such as trying to tear the longest possible unbroken strip from a single piece of paper. This, too, may be used as a game for an entire class or family. Sometimes tearing paper appears to be an art form. One boy used torn paper to make three dimensional spirals of concentric circles. Such creations could be hung as decorations, in many sizes and shapes, and become a point of pride for the child.

Using Community Resources

An autistic child is likely to need his parents more steadily and for more years than other children. Both parents and children can tolerate this better if they make use of community resources for recreation. Participating in programs outside the home becomes more desirable as the child grows older; he should develop some independence this way, even if he is not one of the fortunate ones who can eventually meet all of his own needs.

In most communities, there are far more opportunities for handicapped children than most residents are aware of. A program limited to autistic children is not necessary, nor commonly found. But leaders and volunteers who work with handicapped groups expect to meet unusual children. In cooperation with parents, they soon understand an autistic child and often see angles which a parent overlooks. Special programs can be located through school offices, churches, and service organizations. In addition, there are practice teaching programs reaching out from colleges which offer special education, occupational therapy, music therapy, or mental health sciences. In some communities, parents of the handicapped join forces to start small groups, appealing to schools and senior citizens for volunteer helpers.

It is not always necessary to use a special program. Many organizations make a point of offering their regular services to the handicapped as well as to normal children. Prominent examples of this are the YMCA and Scouts, but a call to the United Givers Fund will turn up other organizations which might consider working with an autistic child when he reaches an age and ability-level for reasonable cooperation. More advanced children with special interests can often find understanding and companionship in such groups as choirs, bands, and bicycle clubs.

A big breather for the parents comes when their child attends summer camp. There are reduced fees available at many camps for parents who cannot afford the full cost. Help in locating camps is available from associations for handicapped children, including the National Society for Autistic Children, the Easter Seal Foundation, and the National Association for Retarded Children. The most efficient method, however, is to ask local groups to recommend nearby camps that a parent can personally evaluate. The needs of children vary greatly; they should be individually matched with appropriate camps.

One progressive institution, the Utah State Training School at American Fork, Utah, permits (by special arrangement) severely handicapped young people who live in the State to visit the school as boarders for a "vacation." If this trend spreads throughout the country, it will be a great service to parents and to taxpayers. In many cases this service makes a critical difference that enables parents to keep their children at home rather than in State-supported institutions.

COMMON SENSE CONSIDERATIONS

Some respondents to our questionnaire noted: "We had to give this activity up because it was costing too much" or "I wasn't able to see this through because there was

so much else to do." Instead of splurging on efforts that cannot be sustained, parents must try to find more manageable activities.

It is typical of autistic children that they keep their interests longer than most people. Yet some parents wrote that they were discouraged when their children abandoned earlier interests. At first thought this seems as though efforts were wasted with skills forgotten and equipment lying unused. But these traits are characteristic of most of us not considered autistic. Many drawers contain untouched hobby materials, perhaps yarn or oil paints. How often do most people actually use fishing lures and binoculars they may own? The lessons which parents urge on "normal" children usually end up, at best, as memories of brief triumph over piano, ballet, tennis, or other childhood challenges. We recognize that these episodes add something important to life, nevertheless. When an autistic child moves along to some new interest, this may be a sign of normal change and maturation. Parents are understandably unhappy when for example a teenaged boy gives up playing his trumpet for watching TV, but he may outgrow that, too, if given alternatives.

TOYS

The toys that autistic children enjoy reflect their level of social maturity more accurately than their age. *Throughout this booklet an asterisk will indicate that a listed toy or activity is highly recommended,* though all are worth trying at the appropriate age. We feel that an unusual activity which a few parents and teachers enthusiastically endorse by calling special attention to it is as significant as something methodically checked by a hundred parents.

WATER TOYS or WATER PLAY* with containers
BALLS*, especially large ones
BLOCKS* and other construction toys for older children
PEG-BOARDS* used as a designing or hammering toy
JIGSAW PUZZLES*, for which some show unusual skill
TOPS* and PINWHEELS* or any similar whirling toy
RECORD PLAYER*, used by many children at an early age
ROCKING HORSE* or SPRINGING HORSE*
BOOKS*
MUSICAL TOYS* and TALKING TOYS*
SLATES* including chalk boards and "magic slate" types
MODELING DOUGH* commercial or home-made
SMALL CARS* and models of trucks, farm, and road machinery
SAND TOYS or KITCHEN TOOLS* in sand
STUFFED ANIMALS and DOLLS
BALLOONS and BUBBLE PIPES
BEAN BAGS

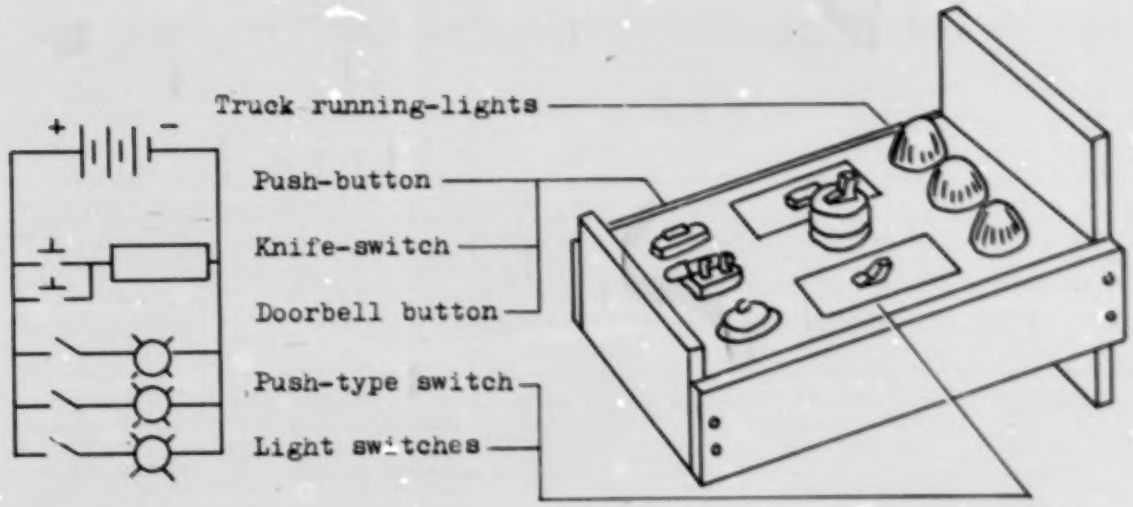
Some of the children in our survey are attached to household objects which they carry around and manipulate. The term toy is an arbitrary social distinction.

Cutting cookies out of rolled dough (real or pretend) is an easy step away from playing with jigsaw puzzles. Here the cookies are being decorated for baking.
Courtesy of Miriam Voelm, Galion, Ohio.

Many gadgets from the kitchen and workshop have more real play value than the gaudy plastic representation which we call toys. A non-toy is likely to be better made and longer lasting, without necessarily being more expensive. Of course, the toys selected must be safe. It would be impossible to list all of the potential playthings in a household. Two parents mentioned mechanical devices that had learning value. These were a timer and a coin changer.

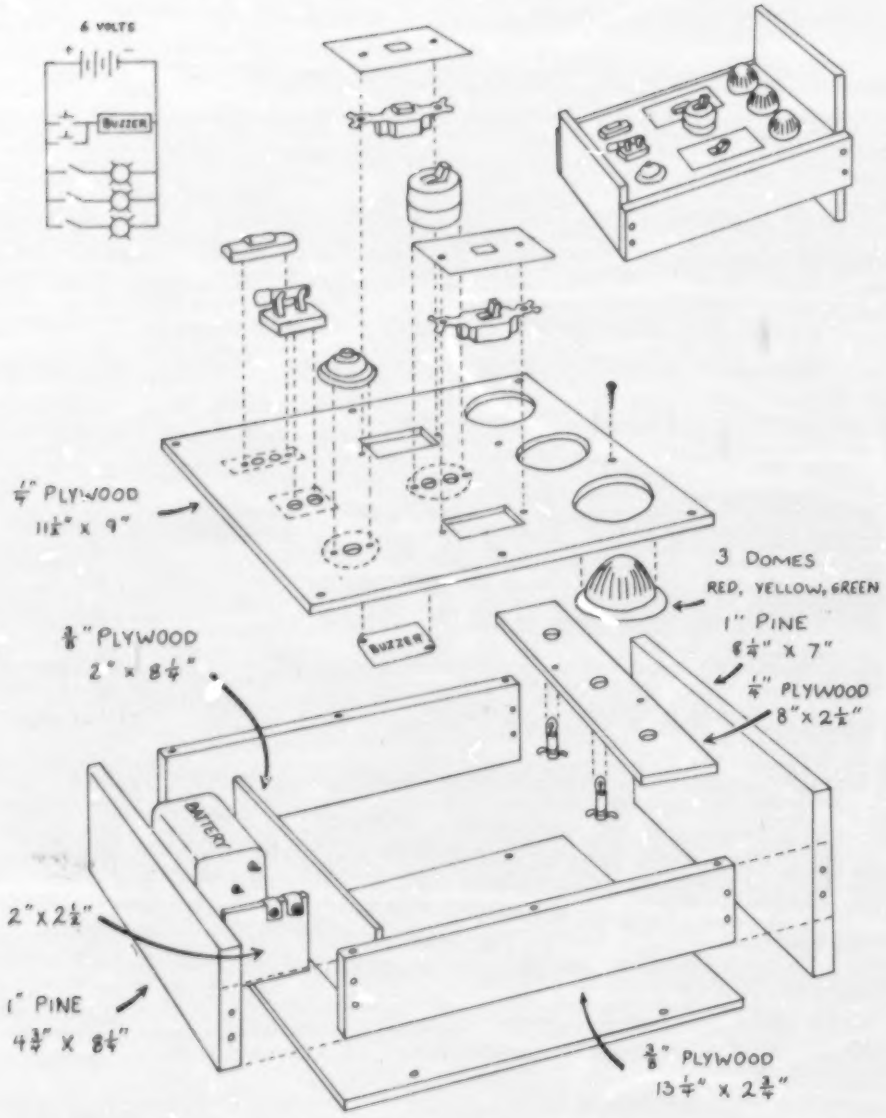
In a class by themselves are the ingenious toys which relatives make. A grandfather responded to one small boy's love of machines by building "The Device that Functions," a discarded motor connected to wheels, pulleys and gears. Mentioned in a previous section was the battery-powered toy invented by another father for his son, shown here.

Figure 1



How one father turned compulsive light-switching into a lasting interest in electronics. The top could be removed to show circuitry. (See p. 6 for an assembly diagram.)
Courtesy of Calvin Alter, Niles, Ohio.

Figure 2



Battery-powered toy. Courtesy of Calvin Alter, Niles, Ohio.

COLLECTIONS

The seemingly strange items which autistic children collect and cherish are often cited as symptoms of their malady. Our questionnaire uncovered a few collectors in each grouping, whether we listed by age, sex, or speaking ability. When the items favored for collection were considered, they made an unusual list indeed.

The seemingly unrelated things which autistic children save take on meaning when they are divided into four main categories. In fact, they are remarkably similar to the objects which nonautistic people collect, with one pervasive difference: they have private rather than social value. Normal children make collections ostensibly to please themselves, but in reality, are much concerned with impressing others.

"DISCOVERIES" of fairly commonplace items which a child has trained his eye to spot easily, even against cluttered backgrounds are not unusual. Examples from the questionnaire are:

LINT
THREAD
STRING
STICKS AND TWIGS
BITS OF PAPER
RUMPLED PLASTIC BAGS
PEBBLES AND ROCKS

These may have an appealing texture, shape, or color which the child likes. Having discovered an item by himself and noticed its significance, he feels a sense of accomplishment in much the same way normal children treasure their collections of shells and colored leaves.

MEMENTOS are articles once functional which have some personal emotional value. They include such things as:

PULL RINGS FROM POP CANS
TOPS OF SODA BOTTLES
DRINKING STRAWS
SOFT DRINK CANS
DETERGENT BOXES
BACON BOXES

Followup letters from respondents to our questionnaire revealed that mementos do, indeed, have very pleasant associations for the children. They are, in a sense, like the worthless trinkets which many people collect because they can't bear to throw them away. The "bacon box boy" loves crisp bacon. It is one of the few foods he eats well. The "candy wrapper girl" once hid in her room and consumed a pound of wrapped candy. As for the children who collect objects that have once been associated with soft drinks, their parents admit that the beverages were particularly craved by the children or served only on special occasions. Collectors of detergent boxes may be enchanted by the commercials which advertise these products on TV, or proud that they recognize the labels.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME are collections of similar items with minor differences, like stamps and coins which nonautistic children save. Generally, the autistic person's collection has no intrinsic value, as shown by such responses to our questionnaire as collections of:

TV GUIDES FROM VARIOUS CITIES
OBITUARY LISTS
UNUSUAL WORDS, WITH SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS
SAMPLES OF FABRICS
RAILROAD SCHEDULES

The autistic child collects what interests him, regardless of whether or not anyone else considers it worth saving. Favorite musical recordings are also popular items with autistic children, but this is not unusual in any young person who enjoys music. Next comes tools, with many kinds being represented. Last are specialized interests such as maps, optical lenses, and different styles of lettering cut from newspapers or magazines. Some parents observe that their children have built collections beyond the point of practical use, but this is not pathological. Consider how many nonautistic people go to extremes when collecting books or antiques.

The value of a collection is in its pleasure for the child and in its teaching potential. As a child matures he may be guided to apply his collecting abilities in ever more intelligent and acceptable ways. Obsessive collecting should be limited when it interferes with normal living, however. For example, a boy was told that he could keep one drawerful of soda cans; the rest of his bureau was for clothing.

MUSIC

Nearly every one of the children represented in our survey found pleasure and recreation in music. Listening to music was indicated as the favorite activity, with re-

cordings, radio, television, or live performances frequently enjoyed. Parents of a few young children added musical toys and mother's singing to the list.

Next to listening, singing (or humming) was frequently checked, but few children took part in choral singing. Participation in band or orchestra was also minimal. We would like to have seen a higher response for these activities on the questionnaire, particularly since one older boy reported that he learned a lot about getting along with people in such groups. In music it is clear that a single voice or instrument depends on the cooperation of others to achieve harmony. This is a fact he does not readily grasp in ordinary social affairs. Types of music reportedly enjoyed by individuals:

NURSERY RHYMES	COUNTRY
ROCK AND ROLL	LATIN
SYMPHONIC MUSIC	WESTERN
CHORUSES	JAZZ
FEMALE VOCALISTS	OLD TIME POPULAR
LULLABIES	MARCHES
KIDDIE RECORDS	BAND
MUSICAL SHOWS	OPERATIC
ELECTRONIC	FAVORITE FAMILY SONGS
LIGHT CLASSICS	
BLUES	ORGAN

Autism does not appear to predispose a child to any one type of music. Rather, these children have preferences which frequently persist for years. Some parents seem dismayed because their child likes loud rock music which they find hard to tolerate. Autistic children are not inclined to follow their parents' musical tastes to any greater degree than other children.

Professor Tom O'Connell of Marshall University is doing research on musical autistic children. In personal communication, he reports that the gifted ones show this interest and ability from an early age, even infancy. There were a few such children in our sample. A typical parental comment was: "She can play anything she hears on the piano, although she cannot read a note." Sixteen children in our survey play the piano to some degree, and 15 play other instruments such as autoharp, clarinet, trumpet, guitar, organ, drum, and accordion. This is not an impressive number of performers. But even if music is used only as recreation, it still represents a boundless source of beauty, comfort, and pleasure.

Playing an old pump organ.
Courtesy of Miriam Voelm, Galion, Ohio.

TRAVEL

The biggest surprise of the questionnaire was that many parents gave high ratings to travel. Apparently the autistic child's resistance to change applies more rigidly to the fixtures of his home than to his position in the outside world. Autistic children of all ages are exceedingly fond of going places. Even those with little speech ability manage to convey this, repeating in a questioning intonation the phrases which promise them travel, such as "Bye-bye car?" and "Next year go trailer?" No form of transportation was specifically mentioned as distasteful to the children. One boy joined a youth hostel organization and pedaled 600 miles on his bicycle in Europe. Several children have crossed the country in camping trailers with their families. "She was the

best little traveler of us all," wrote one mother of a 6-year-old girl.

Not uncommonly, young autistic children take off on their own two feet. They disappear in stores and explore strange buildings without the slightest fear of unknown dangers that may lurk behind closed doors. During the course of this survey, many autistic children were invited to the author's home, where the parents were told they need not restrain them. All of them, ages 4 to 23, explored the house thoroughly. They may have been orienting themselves in a strange setting, but they were also looking for objects of interest. One boy asked about the fabric content of various curtains; another located his favorite record in our collections. They seemed to be more excited than distressed by the new environment.

Many parents added comments to our questionnaire after mentioning travel. "He is very observant." "He understands maps well." "It seems as though she remembers every place we have taken her."

Parents mentioned the following places to which they could take their children on enjoyable excursions:

SHOPPING MALLS	RIVERFRONTS
OPEN MARKETS	BEACHES
GROCERY STORES	ZOOS
RUMMAGE SALES	MUSEUMS
LAUNDROMATS	LIBRARIES
FIELDS AND FORESTS	JUNK YARDS
FARMS	TOWN DUMPS
FACTORIES	AMUSEMENT PARKS
TRAIN STATIONS	OUTDOOR CONCERTS
AIRPORTS	PLAYGROUNDS

An autistic child does not think less of a trip if his parents are doing an errand at the same time. In this way, over the years, he may learn to get around well in his community. Since parents consistently demand better behavior of their children in public places than elsewhere, the standards expected of them for an excursion become a model. Some children who do not eat well at home improve their manners and increase the variety of foods they will try when this is a requirement for eating in a restaurant.

Several parents who responded to the questionnaire had traveled abroad with autistic children past the age of 10. On the whole, these children behaved beautifully while traveling and enjoyed the experience of seeing a new country and trying foreign foods. Physical therapists point out that one reason crippled, palsied, and deformed children love to swim is that water is an equalizer. The same might be said of foreign travel for an autistic child; his parents and siblings are for a while almost as puzzled and confused about social customs and language as he is.

ARTS AND CRAFTS

Most autistic children, like many other children, have the ability to find pleasure in creativity. A few are exceedingly talented in arts and crafts; others are just not interested. In between are the majority, who enjoy making things, whether or not the finished result can be called art. One teacher reported that such activities give her children their most relaxing hours. All their nervousness and uncertainty seems to vanish as they concentrate on a simple project they understand, watching it develop in their own hands. These things were borne out by responses on our questionnaire:

FINGER PAINTING* was frequently checked, but one teacher commented that autistic children do not like

Doing an errand with parent.
Courtesy of Miriam Voelm, Galion, Ohio.

it as much as other art forms because it violates their habits of cleanliness, and they crave consistency in rules

TEARING PAPER*, included for its art potential

MODELING CLAY* plus papier maché and ceramics

PASTING* used for collages and scrap books

DRAWING*, COLORING*, PAINTING* all very popular with a wide age range, along with SCISSORS*

The following activities were indicated as being enjoyed by a few older autistic children of both sexes:

WOODWORKING	KNITTING
WEAVING	CROCHETING
RUG MAKING	SEWING

Among the children with unusual skill in art was a 14-year-old boy who had long been fascinated by alphabets. His skill was so well developed that today he can letter in Old English style on certificates. A girl of 15 enclosed an envelope with our questionnaire that included her fashion drawings. They were remarkably intricate and fresh in design. It is too soon to know whether the younger, talented children in our sample will continue their interests and develop them. Parents can take heart in the knowledge that this is possible, however, even when a considerable autistic handicap exists.

PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT

Playground equipment is important in the recreation of autistic children through adolescence. By contrast, a small group of normal children who filled out the questionnaire showed decreasing interest in these activities as they put more energy into social games and competitions. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that autistic children become unsociable because they are allowed to persist too long in individual sports. More likely it is the other way around, with solo activities being the only ones which the children know how to perform for many years.

A playground or a well-equipped back yard is a good place for informal social interaction, a necessary first step in understanding other people. Some parents make a point of inviting neighborhood children to the yard, observing that their autistic child plays happily *in* a group, if not quite *with* it. Equipment should be selected with a child's "mental age" in mind:

SANDBOX*, good for children through the age of road and tunnel construction

SPLASH POOL*

SWINGS* including tire swings and knotted ropes

CLIMBING TOWERS AND GYMS* including suspended ladders and geodesic domes

SLIDES* including water slides, snow slides, and conventional slides

TRAMPOLINE*, the most popular item despite unavailability for some children. Variation: taut canvas laced over an inflated tractor inner tube

WHEEL TOYS* of all variety such as wagons, wheelbarrows, bikes

EXERCISE BARS, well liked by a few older children

MERRY-GO-ROUND, TEETER-TOTTER

REVOLVING DRUMS, LARGE CABLE SPOOLS to walk on and through

LARGE BOXES for snuggling in, crawling over, and stacking

There are many creative people who would be pleasantly challenged by an invitation to design original equipment. If you are starting a nonprofit recreation program, consider making a newspaper appeal for such talent, or approach the art departments of your nearby colleges and high schools.

DRAMATICS, DANCE, AND GAMES

Dramatic activities are not popular with most autistic children. Nevertheless, there is enough response to recommend dressing-up puppets, and play-acting. These activities may help a child develop awareness of viewpoints other than his own. Dressing-up is often a private game, with the child admiring himself in the mirror. It happens also to be the most frequently checked "dramatic activity." Some children like to put on hats and become Smokey-the-Bear, an airline pilot, or a cowboy. Then, as in puppet play, they can actively imagine how it feels to be someone else.

Among the children who enjoy the acting are a few with unusual ability to imitate different voices or accents. A bit part in a school play can win admiration denied them in other activities. Teachers in special schools report that their autistic children enjoy a simple holiday program if there is not too much confusion on the stage. When the curtain rises, it is reassuring to the child to know that *their* parents are sitting below clapping for *them*. Applause from the audience is often vigorously matched on stage by the children.

There was little response to dancing on our questionnaire. It is possible that parents of boys are reluctant

The joy of a family picnic is expressed in this drawing by Julie Sandusky, New Hartford, New York, at the age of 9, 2 years before she was able to communicate verbally.

Figure 4

to admit a liking for dance, which has a sissy connotation, but will accept the same activity as a game. Joanna Gewertz (1964) wrote an article about teaching dance to children who appear to be more psychotic than most of our sample. She had some success with musical games of movement.

Singing and rhythm activities are the most popular games with younger children. There is a trend away from "Farmer in the Dell" as age increases, toward hide-and-seek and tag. Young adults favor games which might better be classified under sports. Some children become attached to board games in which they progress toward a goal by drawing cards, spinning arrows, or throwing dice. One boy decided to combine his interest in anatomy with his love of such games, and drew up the "Human Body Game" (Figure 3) which his family played with him. Other games of interest listed on our survey were:

SINGING GAMES*
RHYTHM GAMES*
HIDE-AND-SEEK*
TAG*
MAGIC SHOWS
DOMINOES
PING-PONG
CROQUET
SPORTS
PLAY ACTING
DRESSING UP*
PUPPETS
SKITTLES*
CHECKERS
TIC-TAC-TOE
POOL
DARTS
BOARD GAMES, esp.
CANDYLAND*
CHUTES-AND-LADDERS*

SPORTS AND OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Judging from the questionnaire, a perfect day for an autistic child would feature a picnic on the beach. By all odds, swimming is the favorite sport, and picnics are the favorite outdoor activity. Many parents report that their child uses a flotation device in the water, but they still rate the activity as a favorite.

One mother said her son first began to swim by simply walking into the water up to his neck and taking off in a dog paddle. This is highly unusual. More commonly, parents indicated that much patience was needed before their child learned to float or swim. Some who did not check swimming explained that their child is extremely afraid of water. In view of the great pleasure swimming brings to some autistic children, it seems worthwhile to persist in helping them overcome a fear of water. This may be done in graduated steps, beginning with water play at the shallow end of a pool or the edge of a lake. Do not attempt an advance step until a less threatening one has been conquered. A succession of steps might go like this:

1) Sitting in shallow water pouring water from pails
2) Splashing body and face
3) Ducking the face voluntarily, blowing bubbles through nose
4) Moving into deeper water with a flotation device
5) Playing in deeper water voluntarily

By the time a child enjoys all these steps, he is ready for swimming lessons at a depth where he feels safe.

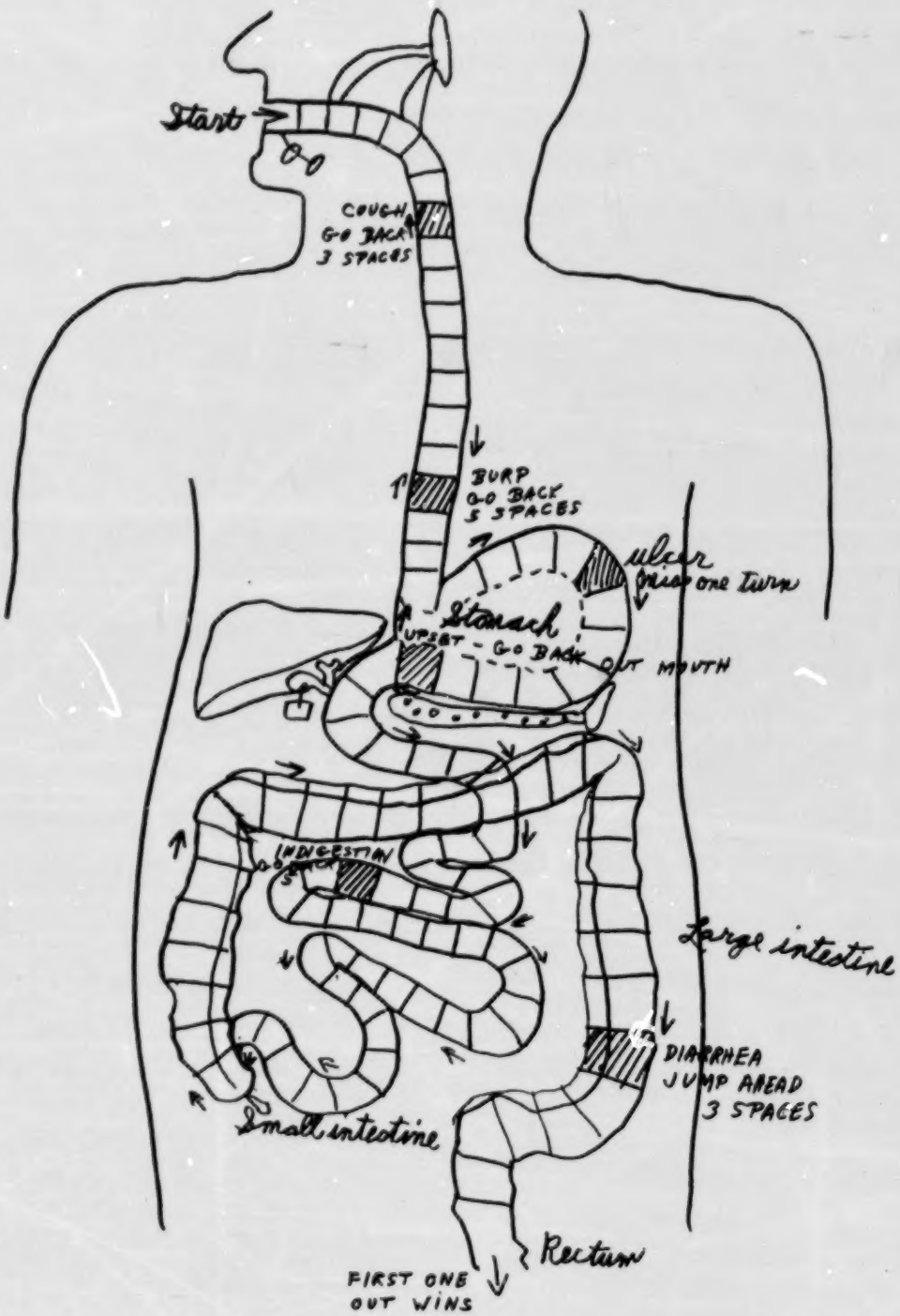
Following are the favorite sports and outdoor activities of the children whose parents responded to our questionnaire:

SWIMMING* previously discussed
BICYCLE RIDING* (including tricycles) drew over a hundred responses
ROLLER SKATING* is enjoyed by many older children
ICE SKATING enjoyed by a few
HORSEBACK RIDING* was not frequently checked, but was highly recommended for those with facilities
TEAM SPORTS* are of great interest, though a child is more often a spectator than a participant
TETTERBALL*, BADMINTON, KICKBALL, VOLLEYBALL
BOWLING*
FRISBEE*
PICNICS*, CAMPING*, CAMPFIRES*, HIKING, BOATING, FEEDING DUCKS
TUMBLING, ROUGH-HOUSING*

In general, sports which call for quick decisions are not enjoyed. This is especially true in games where the actions of others determine the appropriate responses. A child may be able to block, throw, kick, or run, but an inability to make split-second judgments in a changing situation gives him a continuing handicap (Dewey 1972).

OTHER SPECIALIZED INTERESTS

We have mentioned some of the specialties of autistic children in the sections on art and music. There are many other subjects which have the potential to fascinate autistic children who have reached an appropriate stage of development. Mathematics, astronomy, weather, electricity, and calendars were all frequently checked. Parents and teachers are impressed by the unusual ability these children have to store and recall complex pat-



The Human Body Game. Courtesy of Jim Aycock, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Figure 3

terns. As recreation, these skills are both a source of private pleasure and a chance to gain social recognition.

RECREATION FROM ACTIVITIES NOT USUALLY CONSIDERED ENJOYABLE

This cumbersome title introduced one section of the questionnaire. We suggested, as examples: making lists, taking things apart, mixing foods, and doing household chores. There was ample space to write in others.

As expected, each of the activities mentioned was liberally checked. "Taking things apart" was the winner, a source of considerable dismay in some households. One mother commented that when a social worker asked her, "Does this child come from a broken home?" she was tempted to reply, "Wrecked is a better description." Yet eventually her mute son stopped his busy work with the screwdriver and seemed to realize that household possessions were not to be dismantled. "I believe," said his mother, "that for years he didn't see any appliance as a unit, but as an assembly of detachable parts." We have no reports of parents who deliberately channeled this interest into a career, but several former autistic children are now employed in sorting, packing, or assembling small objects. Perhaps the ability to assemble is the happy side of an obsession with parts.

Suggested playthings for children who are handy with a screwdriver are old clocks, old radios, and old record players, all with power cords removed. The object should be clearly marked with a sign the child understands to mean: "This is your toy to take apart as you wish." Rummage sales are a good source for discards an autistic child may find exciting.

What other activities, not usually considered enjoyable, do autistic children seek as recreation? Chores!—plain old-fashioned work to most people. A tennis player may point out that the dividing line between work and play is not determined by the amount of energy invested. Autistic children will often take a fancy to certain jobs around the house which they claim as their own. Why? In the words of one teenager, "I feel good when I chop wood." Whether good means useful, healthy, important, strong, or appreciated, it is obviously a happy emotion and that is what recreation is about. Some of the favorite chores, without respect to traditional sex roles, are as follows:

SHOPPING FOR GROCERIES
PREPARING FOOD
SETTING THE TABLE
FILLING SALT SHAKERS
GRATING CHEESE
PUTTING AWAY SILVERWARE
CARRYING OUT GARBAGE
EMPTYING WASTEBASKETS
SHARPENING PENCILS
RUNNING THE VACUUM CLEANER
CHANGING SHEETS
DRIVING NAILS
DIGGING PRECISION HOLES
SHOVELING SNOW
PLANTING ONIONS AND BULBS

There is a great deal to be said for encouraging this kind of recreation, even when the child needs constant supervision and the final job needs a touch-up. In addition to his private delight in a particular chore, he is acquiring a skill which will be useful later in life. One young man now lives with his father, having learned to share the household duties since his mother died. A more severely autistic girl endears herself to the staff of the institution where she lives by making the beds of all the other children in her cottage.

Taking things apart. Courtesy of Miriam Voelm, Galion, Ohio.

EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF AN ACTIVITY

The more severely an autistic child is affected, the less he is able to generalize what he learns. Recreation which was selected to develop social awareness may appear to fail in its purpose. One class of autistic children was taught to roller skate in pairs. As soon as the need for physical support was over, they abandoned their partners as willingly as anyone lays aside a crutch. Their teacher confessed, "I hoped they would develop friendships by holding hands."

To avoid a frustrating sense of failure, consider whether an activity has had one or more values by answering the following questions:

Was it a source of pleasure?
Did it divert the child from catastrophic feelings?
Did it provide healthful exercise and release of tension?
Did it lead the child from a rut which was impeding his progress?
Was it a logical step towards a worthy goal?
Did it improve his skills?
Did it teach a social formula which may be used again?

By this checklist, the roller skating endeavor was highly successful. It offered joy, diversion, exercise, balance skills, and an example of how people can help each other in one situation.

We hope other activities in this booklet will be as well adapted to the needs of individual children of all ages.

The Questionnaire

(The questionnaire used in our survey may also prove helpful to parents and professionals working with children in stimulating additional ideas for recreational activities.)

Child's age ..... Sex ..... Diagnosis .....

Speech Development: ☐ essentially mute ☐ communicates verbally since age of .....

☐ Check in front of activities enjoyed in the past year.

☐ Star to indicate intense interest, or double star for skill beyond average for normal children of the same age.

Please feel free to change questions or add margin notes. All returns will be personally evaluated.

(For young or severely disabled children, many spaces will be blank)

1.—TOY EQUIPMENT: ☐ water toys, ☐ play dough, ☐ jigsaw puzzles, ☐ rubber stamps, ☐ blocks, ☐ balls, ☐ peg boards, ☐ magic slates, ☐ design making toys, ☐ construction toys .....

Others .....

2.—PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT: ☐ sandbox, ☐ splash pool, ☐ swing, ☐ climbing gym, ☐ exercise bars, ☐ slide, ☐ trampoline .....

Others .....

3.—ARTS AND CRAFTS: ☐ finger painting, ☐ paper tearing, ☐ clay modeling, ☐ pasting, ☐ drawing, ☐ coloring, ☐ painting, ☐ woodwork, ☐ weaving, ☐ sewing, Others .....

4.—DRAMATICS: ☐ dressing, ☐ puppets, ☐ play acting, ☐ other part in dramatic production: .....

5.—GAMES: ☐ singing games, ☐ rhythm games, ☐ hide-and-seek, ☐ tag, ☐ bowling, ☐ ping-pong, ☐ tether ball, ☐ croquet, ☐ checkers, ☐ chess, ☐ other boxed games .....

Others .....

6.—SPORTS: ☐ individual ball play, ☐ swimming, ☐ kite flying, ☐ jump rope, ☐ bicycling, ☐ roller skating, ☐ ice skating, ☐ horseback riding, ☐ spectator, team sports, ☐ participant, team sports .....

Others .....

7.—OUTDOOR RECREATION: (If not listed above) ☐ picnics, ☐ camping, ☐ hiking, ☐ boating, ☐ fishing, ☐ campfires .....

Others .....

8.—MUSIC: ☐ rhythm band, ☐ singing, ☐ choral singing, ☐ piano, ☐ other instrument ....., ☐ listening to records or tapes, ☐ other listening ....., ☐ composing. List styles of music enjoyed .....

Other musical activities .....

9.—RECREATION GROUPS: ☐ group for handicapped, ☐ group for normal, ☐ Scouts, ☐ Other recreational organization .....

10.—COLLECTIONS: ☐ stamps, ☐ coins, ☐ nature specimens .....

Others (however strange) .....

11.—TELEVISION PREFERENCE: ☐ commercials, ☐ Sesame Street, ☐ movies, ☐ cartoons, ☐ variety shows, ☐ children's stories.

Others .....

Frequency of watching: ☐ often, ☐ rarely.

12.—SPECIALIZED INTERESTS: ☐ music, ☐ mathematics, ☐ astronomy, ☐ calendars, ☐ weather, ☐ electricity, ☐ history

Others .....

13.—RECREATION FROM ACTIVITIES NOT USUALLY CONSIDERED ENJOYABLE: ☐ making lists, ☐ taking things apart, ☐ mixing foods, ☐ doing chores, Others, however eccentric .....

14.—DANCING: ☐ Unstructured dancing, ☐ folk dancing, ☐ Other .....

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For other references which contribute to a general understanding of autistic children, see the bibliography of the National Society for Autistic Children.